

OutrageLit

Defining a literary structure for works of anger and
activism in Post-Pandemic era

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
A Mandatory Moral Universe	4
Character Types and Moral Value	5
Alternative Character and Morality Types	6
Story Structure Using Kurt Vonnegut's Story Diagrams	7
Man in the Hole	8
Boy Meets Girl	9
From Bad to Worse	10
Which Way is Up?	11
Creation Story	12
Old Testament	13
New Testament	14
Can Outrage Literature Last Beyond the Moment?	15
Summary	16

Introduction

Like many others, the COVID-19 pandemic made me more aware of the social media and the trends that were being generated on social media platforms. Also like many others, I noticed a certain type of storytelling develop involving more activist and transgressive rhetoric, themes, and behaviors. While others have labeled these works as “woke”, or simply poorly written, and tossed them aside, I began to wonder if the world wasn’t seeing the development of a new form of literature. That is not to say that stories meant to foment revolution have not existed before; history is filled with them. In this case, however, I noticed similar tropes being used, and a general similarity of topics and structure. My interest was piqued, and I thought I might try to define some of the similarities that I encountered. If I am correct in the idea that a new form of literature is developing, then perhaps this document will be useful as a general starting point for aspiring storytellers or those who analyze their tales.

It probably weakens my argument at this point to admit that I do not gravitate towards this type of storytelling in a general sense – I tend to favor stories with more universal applicability. That said, that does not mean that there is not worth in other types of stories; there are types of stories that are meant to be expressions of the moment, and their quality is in the skill of the telling, not the author’s intent.

My effort begins with the next section where I define what I see as the moral universe of this new type of work. Following that is a section on how characters in this moral universe are defined and categorized. I will follow this with a variation of Kurt Vonnegut’s story diagrams, and thereafter some closing thoughts before offering a final summary. I hope readers find value in this work.

A Mandatory Moral Universe

Stories of this type are necessarily activist in nature, and as such operate on an unambiguous moral scale. To begin with, the world represented in such a story revolves around an Oppressor and the Oppressed. The goal of such a story is not to break out of the cycle of oppression, but rather to invert it such that the Oppressed becomes the Oppressor, and vice-versa. Within the moral philosophy of the story, there is no other option; the universe can only exist within the oppression dynamic, and while being oppressed is cruel and unfair, it also justifies turning the tables and becoming the oppressor.

This “oppressed-turned-oppressor” dynamic might be outlandish to some, but it is important to understand that this type of literature is an expression of anger or outrage (or at least trying to capitalize on it). A certain amount of vengeance or punishment is demanded to satisfy the unjust nature of the world as it is presented. The point of this type of story is to investigate this unjustness and resolve it by inverting the power structure as an act of revenge. With this type of story, the two most common endings are the “good ending” where the oppressed character successfully inverts the power structure, or the “bad ending” where the oppressor character maintains the power structure. There are other possibilities (as indicated in the “Which Way is Up?” story diagram later), but there is no variation that ends with a sense of equality or even neutrality.

Owing to this dynamic, the subject matter for these types of stories usually revolves around one demographic, represented by the protagonist characters, being oppressed by one or more other demographics. There can be a bit of variation here, but the oppression itself is the subject of the story, and the point around which all else is built.

Character Types and Moral Value

Characters in this type of story can be broken down into four types, each with a moral value associated with them:

The Protagonist: As the main focus of the story, the Protagonist type is presented as morally good in character and action. Should the Protagonist engage in behavior that would usually be considered morally wrong, such action would be presented as morally justified or as a result of persecution by external forces (see the Oppressor character type, below). This is the only character type that is presented as morally good. The others are presented on a scale of “badness”, so to speak.

The Ally: The Ally character is the least immoral of all the remaining character types, due to the fact that the Ally character type is actively attempting to help the Protagonist. Any action in which aids the Protagonist characters is morally good. Any other action is presented as morally bad through ignorance or perhaps selfishness. It is possible for the Ally character type to “graduate” to the Protagonist type if the Ally character somehow enters the Protagonist character “group”. For example, a female Ally to an LGBT Protagonist group realizes she is herself LGBT.

The Neutral: This type of character neither helps nor hinders the Protagonist characters and therefore is considered more morally bad than the Ally due to disinterest in the plight of the Protagonist characters. It might be said that these characters indirectly support the oppression of the Protagonist characters through inaction and disinterest. It is possible for the Neutral to “graduate” to the Ally character type if the Neutral characters somehow realize or come to terms about something that causes a desire to graduate. For example, if the Neutral character realizes that the problems affecting the

Protagonist or Ally characters are part of a shared problem that extends beyond a particular character or group. Another example would be if something happens to a Protagonist character that is so outside the norm that the Neutral character feels compelled to help.

The Oppressor: This is the least moral of all the character types, and unlike the others, does not “graduate” to other character types. This is because this character type is the main antagonist type (ie. the force to be defeated). As such, the actions of the Oppressor character are presented as almost universally morally wrong regardless of how charismatic the character might be. At best, the character’s actions might initially be presented in a positive light, only to later be shown as quite negative.

Alternative Character and Morality Types

If the types presented above are too constricting for an intended story, there is an alternative that a storyteller can use; instead of focusing on characters, the storyteller can focus on actions in the story in general. Such actions would operate on the following moral scale:

Most morally wrong: Actions which directly target a particular person or group (that is, actions that target the protagonists of the story).

Less morally wrong: Actions which do not target a particular person or group, but nonetheless harms that group without any punishment or repercussions to those who instigated the actions.

Least morally wrong: Actions that are meant to aid a particular person or group, even if said action fail or result in other problems.

Not morally wrong: Actions that are considered a positive with regards to the story and are unambiguously positive for a particular person or group.

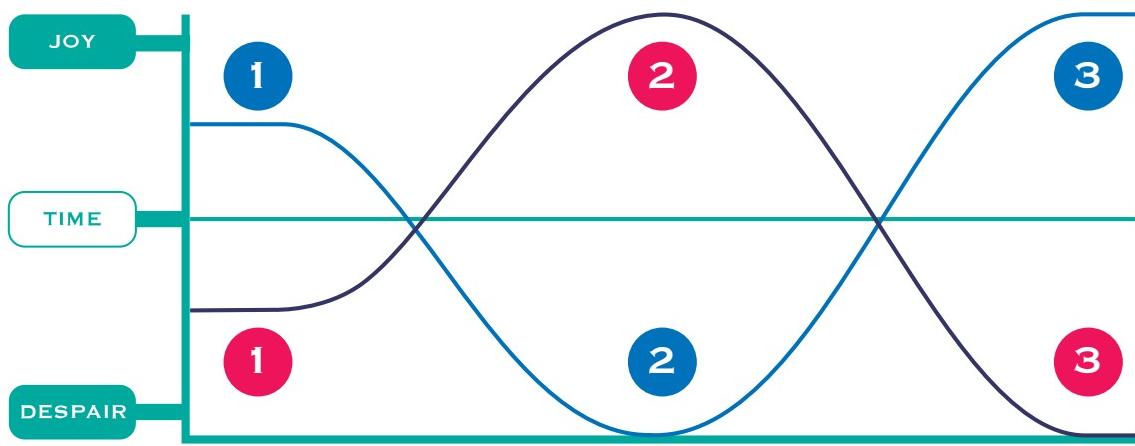
Story Structure Using Kurt Vonnegut's Story Diagrams

Although a story can take any structure, and, in some cases, none at all, the nature of outrage storytelling creates a particular problem when the emotion of the story overtakes the verisimilitude of the story. Having a solid plot structure can help keep the story on track. With that in mind, a variation of Kurt Vonnegut's story diagrams are presented below.

Kurt Vonnegut's story diagrams were part of a rejected Master's thesis that described the emotional "shape" of stories. Understanding these diagrams is simple: according to Vonnegut, all stories mark a series of transitions from good fortune to ill fortune (here marked as "joy" or "despair") over some length of time. Using these metrics, Vonnegut was able to come up with seven diagrams that represent the basic categories of stories one is likely to find.

In Vonnegut's original designs, however, the diagrams chart only the protagonist characters. For outrage storytelling the diagrams must also chart the emotional shape of the oppressive characters as well. This reflects the Oppressor/Oppressed moral dynamic of the story's universe, and could aid storytellers by having a useful framework to organize the ideas for their tales.

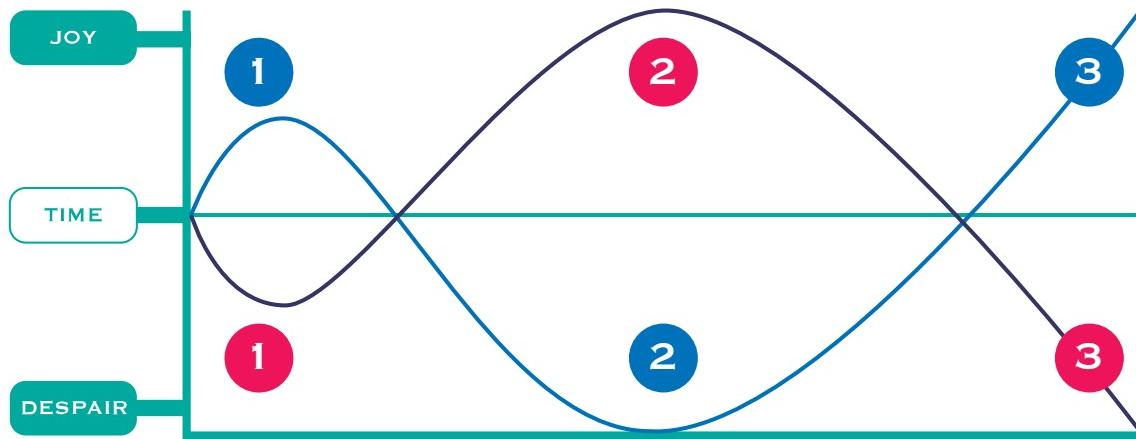
Man in the Hole



This diagram is often associated with “The Hero’s Journey” as popularized by Joseph Campbell. The beats are as follows:

1. The protagonists start out relatively joyful (or at least positive), although not at the maximum joy seen at rightmost side of the diagram. The oppressors are closer to despair (or at least unhappy or unsatisfied), although not a maximum despair as seen at the rightmost side of the diagram.
2. The oppressors enact some plan that inverts the lines of the diagram, placing themselves at maximum joy while the protagonists are at maximum despair. This continues until the protagonists are able to figure out a way to turn the tables, beginning the start of the next beat.
3. The final beat is where the protagonists, who were oppressed, now become the oppressors. That is to say that they now engage the power dynamic to its maximum effect, switching positions with their oppressors and achieving maximum joy as a result. The previous oppressors are effectively crushed and consigned to maximum despair.

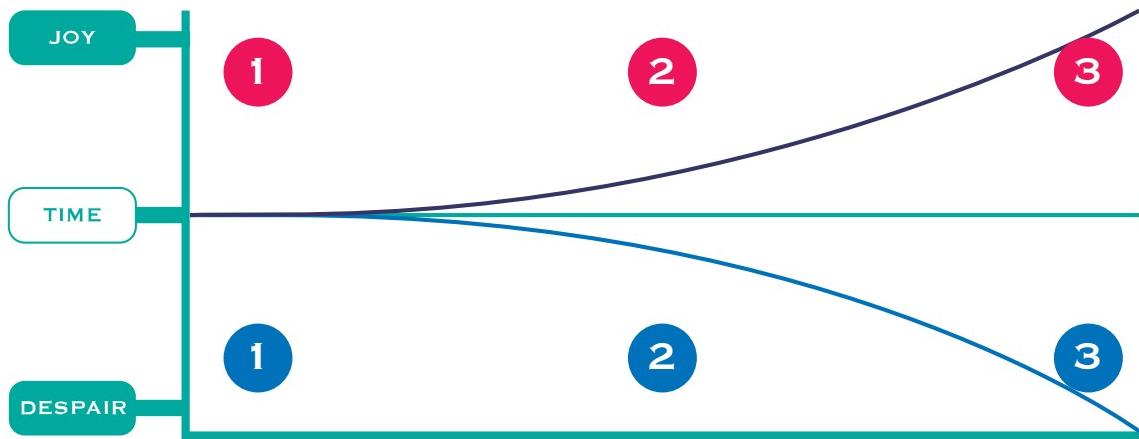
Boy Meets Girl



The focus on this story is on finding something, losing it, then finding it again to great success. The beats are as follows:

1. Unlike the “Man in the Hole” diagram, both the protagonists and the oppressors begin relatively neutral. It is only when the protagonists encounter something that raises their arc towards “joy” that the oppressors find their arc dipping towards “despair”. The title of this diagram is taken from general romance stories where a boy meets a girl, loses her, then finds her again, which brings him maximum joy.
2. The oppressors become inspired to ruin the happiness of the protagonists or otherwise acquire whatever happens to be the source of joy. They engage in behavior that takes away the thing that brings the protagonists joy. This drops the protagonists towards maximum despair, and the oppressors to maximum joy.
3. The protagonists somehow figure out how to re-discover or retrieve the thing that brings them joy. In so doing, the oppressors are cast down into maximum despair while the protagonists themselves achieve maximum joy.

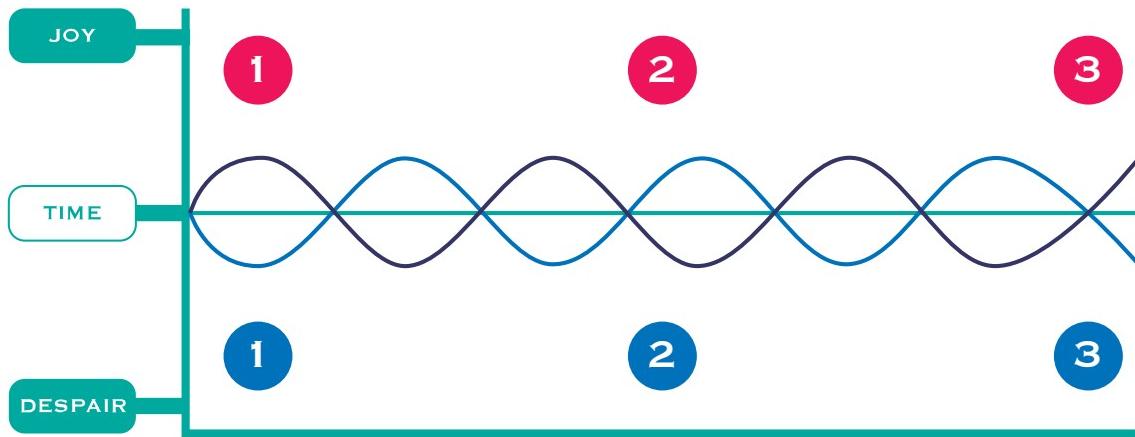
From Bad to Worse



One of the more depressing story types. Authors using this diagram will be those who want to hit the audience with the darkness of the moment or circumstance. The beats are as follows:

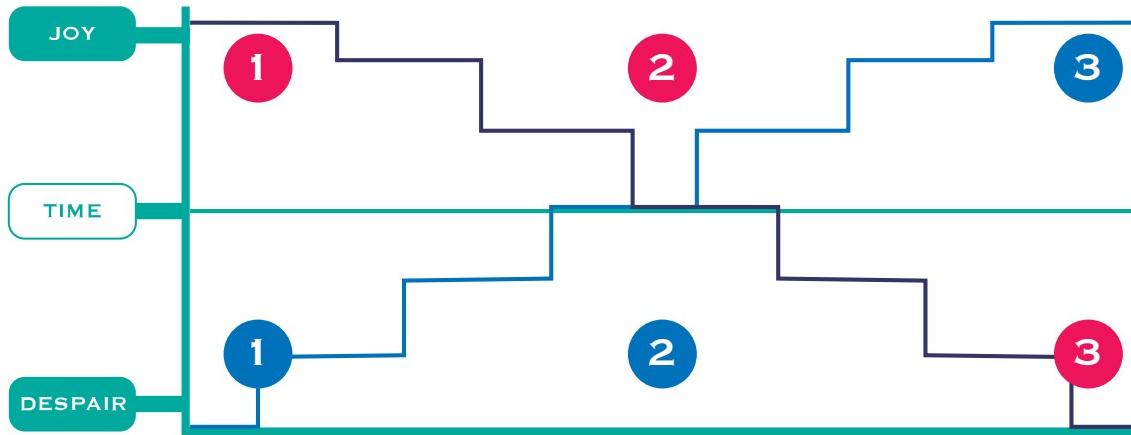
1. The protagonists and oppressors are again in a neutral state, but in this type of story there is nothing but despair in store for the protagonists. As a result they are not prepared for what is about to happen.
2. Either because of the circumstances or because of specific actions of the oppressors, the protagonists begin their inevitable and unstoppable arc towards despair as the oppressors begin their rise to joy.
3. The final beat is where the protagonists, despite their best efforts, reach maximum despair while the oppressors reach maximum joy. Here, all attempts to reach a joyful state have failed and the protagonists can only look up and see the oppressors reveling in an inherently unfair world.

Which Way is Up?



This particular story diagram is interesting in that nothing changes – this is the point of the story. Sometimes, the protagonists will reach a modicum of joy, and sometimes they will reach a modicum of despair. The same can be said for the oppressors. This type of story is not about achieving victory for either group, but rather it is about illustrating the endless cycle of oppression and release that prevents either side from achieving maximum joy or despair. That is to say, everything becomes one long and endless grind with no end in sight.

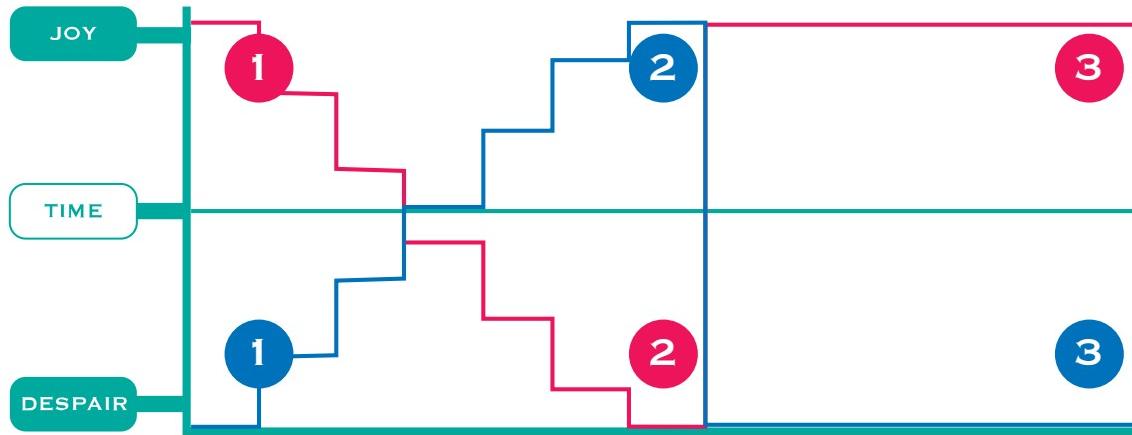
Creation Story



The “Creation Story” is so named because Kurt Vonnegut found stories that matched the story of Biblical creation. Like the “From Bad to Worse” story diagram, there is an inevitable and unstoppable progression as the story continues. The beats are as follows:

1. The oppressors start out at maximum joy, and the protagonists start out at maximum despair. Due to some circumstance, or due to the acts or nature of the protagonists, there are a series of events that slowly raise the protagonists from despair towards joy. This has a mirroring effect for the oppressors, which bring the oppressors down from joy to despair.
2. Both parties reach a middle point between joy and despair. Presumably, there would be an enhanced effort by the oppressors to stop any further development, but ultimately, these efforts are unsuccessful.
3. In the final beat, the protagonists inch their way to maximum joy. The oppressors find themselves gradually moved to maximum despair. The progress might be slow because of the actions of the oppressors, but the ultimate end of the transition cannot be stopped.

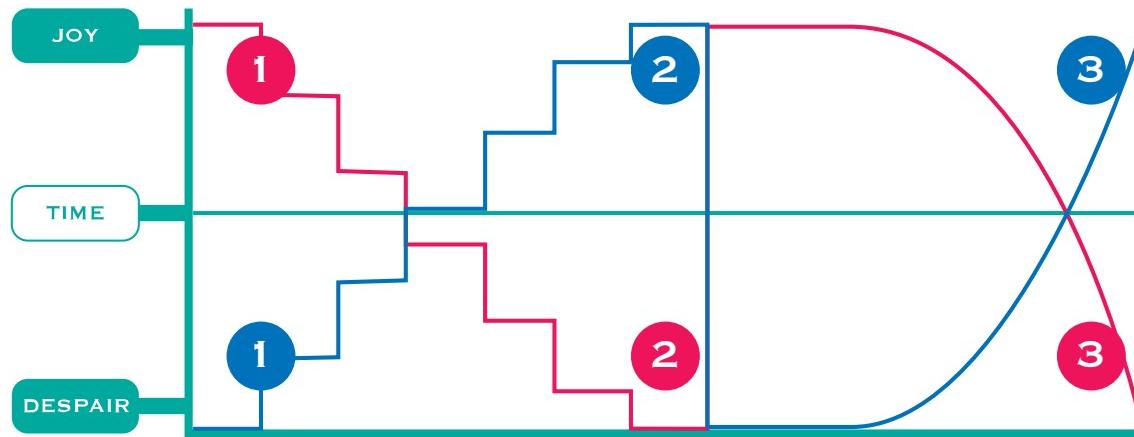
Old Testament



The “Old Testament” story bears an initial similarity to the “Creation Story”, but the middle beat has a dramatic change that permanently alters the course of events. With regards to the Old Testament itself, this is where Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge and are cast out of Eden. The beats are as follows:

1. The oppressors start out at maximum joy, and the protagonists start out at maximum despair. Some series of events or actions slowly raise the protagonists from maximum despair towards maximum joy. This has a mirroring effect for the oppressors, which bring the oppressors down from joy to despair.
2. Some event or action causes a drastic shift that sends the protagonists back down to maximum despair, sending the oppressors back up to maximum joy.
3. Despite the best efforts of the protagonists, or perhaps due to the best efforts of the oppressors, the protagonists cannot change their fate. They remain at maximum despair and can only look up at the oppressors who exist at maximum joy.

New Testament



The “New Testament” story is a variation of the “Old Testament”, but with a more positive twist – where the “Old Testament” ends with nothing but despair for the protagonists, the “New Testament” ends with maximum joy, giving a more hopeful and positive ending. The beats are as follows:

1. The oppressors start out at maximum joy, and the protagonists start out at maximum despair. Some series of events or actions slowly raise the protagonists from maximum despair towards maximum joy. This has a mirroring effect for the oppressors, which bring the oppressors down from joy to despair.
2. Some event or action causes a drastic shift that sends the protagonists back down to maximum despair, sending the oppressors back up to maximum joy.
3. Due to some circumstance or action, the protagonists find a way to overcome their situation, driving them up to maximum joy. This has the effect of the oppressors, despite their best efforts, falling down to maximum despair, resulting in the final positions for both sides at the story.

Can Outrage Literature Last Beyond the Moment?

Probably not. The issue at hand is that Outrage Literature is a manifestation of the emotion of a moment. The authors of such literature want to express anger over some circumstance and have constructed stories in order to do that. Readers of such literature read it because it confirms their pre-existing feelings, or at least gives voice to them. Compare this against Maya Angelou's assertion that Shakespeare was a Black woman. Maya Angelou did not mean that Shakespeare was actually Black or a woman, but rather that the words he wrote has universal resonance; a resonance she felt as a Black woman. Outrage Literature is not about universal resonance – it is about discussing a specific issue regarding a specific interest at a specific time.

It is not that Outrage Literature, as defined in this document, cannot rise to something more universal, but it seems most often interested in expressing its own time and place, and as a result is locked to that time and place – the focus is on making the audience feel what is happening “here and now”. There is nothing less worthy about this goal, but the works selected for the literary canon of a genre, category, or nation seem to be presented in ways where their themes, however specific, have broader applicability that extends beyond a particular time or place. “Moby Dick” by Herman Melville, for example, was an attempt by both the characters Ishmael and Captain Ahab to define God; Ishmael through study and observation, and Ahab through destruction. Despite the themes of this work, “Moby Dick” is not just for Christians. The novel’s detailed examination of sea life and those who participate in it, coupled with Ishmael’s attempt to understand the divine using the sea as a proxy, make the “Moby Dick” a novel with value that can be applied to whomever reads it. Outrage Literature is simply not interested in this, and thus can only be an expression of a given time and place.

Summary

In this document, I tried to formalize trends I noticed with regards to stories that I had noticed from roughly 2020 to the date of this publication. These stories, which I collectively call “Outrage Literature”, were created with varying levels of skill and success, but all exhibited trends of the oppressor/oppressed dynamic, with an interest not in resolving the dynamic, but in inverting it. That is, the oppressed wish to become the oppressors, not end the cycle of oppression. This struck me as a new category of literature, and I wanted to see if I could formalize it into its own theory.

I began by defining the moral structure of this story type; generally, these stories do not have unambiguous morality. The morality, however, is not “good” vs “evil” so much as “oppressed” vs “oppressor” with moral value found in switching these roles regardless of what acts are taken to do so. I followed this by defining the character types in such a story and their attendant moral values. Finally, I adapted Kurt Vonnegut’s story diagrams to show how stories of this type can be structured, taking into account the characters of the oppressed protagonist and an oppressor antagonist.

Finally, I briefly ponder whether this type of storytelling can last through the ages. I don’t think it can in its purest form, but that doesn’t mean I discount the possibility, either. Ultimately, it is the audience that decides what works are great and what works are forgettable. All that is left for storytellers to do is make them.